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Covid-19: More must be done to protect ethnic minority communities in the second wave, review says

Abi Rimmer

The government has not done enough to protect the UK's black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME) communities ahead of the second wave of covid-19, a review by Doreen Lawrence has warned.

In a review¹ commissioned by the Labour Party to investigate why the BAME population was disproportionately affected by the pandemic, Lawrence called for a wider package of immediate measures to tackle the problem, which should include further steps to protect frontline staff and improve public health communication.

Earlier this year, a survey conducted by the BMA found that less than a third (29%) of BAME doctors in the UK believed they were fully protected from covid-19 at work, whereas nearly half (46%) of their white colleagues did.²

Lawrence's review found similar problems. "Alongside inadequate personal protective equipment, we heard that for many BAME workers there has been a failure to implement and access risk assessments," it said. There had also been insufficient government guidance for BAME workers' protection, it said. "For groups that have historically faced discrimination or feel like outsiders in UK workplaces, it can be particularly hard to raise health and safety concerns."

Lawrence said that the government should confirm that employers have a duty to report occupational infections of, and deaths from, covid-19 and introduce a legal requirement for employers to publish their covid-19 risk assessments on a central portal.

Commenting on her review's findings, Lawrence warned that if immediate action was not taken to protect those most at risk, more people would unnecessarily die during a second wave of the pandemic. "If no long term action is taken to tackle structural inequalities we will keep seeing this pattern of injustice occur beyond the pandemic," she added. "We have heard enough talk from the government. It is now time to act."

Chaand Nagpaul, BMA council chair, welcomed the review and said that it emphasised what the BMA had already said—that more must be done to protect at-risk groups.

"We're pleased that the report—which the BMA contributed to—shares our view about what the government needs to do to reverse the disproportionate impact of covid-19 on members of these communities," he said.

"We also need to see covid-19 risk assessments for all health and social care workers strengthened to help give staff the necessary protections they need at work. We need to have data collected which shows the infection information broken down by ethnicity and more data linking occupation and ethnicity, both of which the report also calls for."

1 An avoidable crisis, the disproportionate impact of covid-19 on black, Asian and minority ethnic communities. a review by Baroness Doreen Lawrence. October 2020. www.lawrencereview.co.uk.

2 Mahase E. Covid-19: Ethnic minority doctors feel more pressured and less protected than white colleagues, survey finds. *BMJ* 2020;369:m2506. doi: 10.1136/bmj.m2506 pmid: 32571793